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ABSTRACT

An Orientation/Self-Management course was developed at Mercy College, Detroit, to reduce the high attrition rate (95%) among conditionally admitted full-time (CAFT) students, i.e., those admitted with less than a "C" average upon high school graduation. The course focused on the student as an adult, vital, growing, and independent person; the college and its offerings, services, policies, and overall context; and the relationship between the student and the college. The course is organized in five clusters, with college administrators and student services professionals teaching units in their areas of expertise. The clusters are: (1) "Goals: Yours and the College's," which addresses the college mission, goal setting, and academic goals; (2) "Reaching Your Academic Goals," which studies and provides guidance on improving student habits, behavior, and skills; (3) "Roadblocks to Reaching Academic Goals," which examines stress, diet, financial problems, and other barriers to academic success; (4) "Knowing and Knowing How to Communicate," which outlines college regulations and teacher and administrator expectations of students; and (5) "Exploring Occupations--the World of Work," which helps students develop realistic career goals. The success of the course is evidenced by the positive response of students and faculty, a large increase in the use of student services offices and facilities, and a 50% drop in the attrition rate of CAFT students. (HB)

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The Orientation Course: A First Step Toward Retention

Daniel R. Hoeber

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Because of a complex of circumstances, some predictable and others coming as a total surprise, institutions of higher education find themselves trying frantically to keep their numbers up by all sorts of methods. At the same time, we are operating with less and less funding, thus making additional expenditures to support new methods of upping our enrollments all but impossible. Such a "Catch-22" would have stumped even Lt. Milo Minderbinder, Joseph Heller's wheeler-dealer in that novel, who managed to turn a handsome profit on the carnage of World War II. Most of us turn to some computer-assisted, agency-assisted student search system to identify where our potential freshmen are, which new markets to tap, and which new recruiting methods to employ. Until recently, most of us were so busy looking ahead to the new student market that we rarely looked over our shoulders to see how those we already had in the fold were doing. In short, we concerned ourselves more with recruiting than with retention as a solution to our problems, and we did so in spite of the fact that it costs less to retain than it does to recruit.

Many colleges which have made retention efforts have designed

reactive rather than proactive models and have based their work on providing additional academic assistance. For instance, at a national conference last year I sat in on a session regarding retention programs during which speakers from four different colleges outlined their programs; in each case the colleges waited for the computer to spit out semester grades and identify students who had done poorly. Then, those in the retention programs went to work on those students through tutorials, help sessions, etc. to assist these students in various content areas. No one in these programs ever bothered to look at the vast amount of data they had at their disposal about these student, i.e., each semester they were dealing with a population that undoubtedly had more in common than just a poor academic performance in one particular term. Had they studied these data, they might have been able to identify and meet a student's needs before those unmet needs translated into failing grades. What I will outline for you here is a piece of a larger retention program, an Orientation Course, which is proactive, inexpensive, effective, and easily replicated.

About six years ago while our enrollment at Mercy College of Detroit was not only holding but growing, a few of us who worked and taught in the academic Basic Skills Program there, got interested in doing an attrition/retention study on the students with whom we worked. For the most part these are students we term conditionally-admitted, full-time students (CAFT's); these are students who come to us with less than a "C" average at high school graduation. CAFT's make up about one quarter of our freshman class each Fall or about 100 students of

this classification each year. We had a hunch that the attrition rate would be high simply because, after a year or so, we no longer saw certain students around whom we had taught in their freshman year. There was no way, however, that we were prepared for the figures we derived from our study. Going back five years and studying all CAFT's admitted from that point to the present, we found that we were graduating only 5% of these students from any given class of 100, and patterns were already forming among groups having entered less than four years ago which indicated that this figure would hold. One hypothesis offered for this horrendous attrition rate held that these students were academically weak to begin with and thus flunked out. The study of academic performance of those students exploded that hypothesis by showing that just 5% of these students (the same percentage as graduate) ever came under the sanctions of suspension or dismissal. Further, the vast majority of those who left had perfectly acceptable grade point averages at the time of departure. This is not to say that they were on the way to becoming academic All-Americans, but they had higher GPA's in college than they had been able to achieve in eight semesters of high school. We then considered the possibility that these students were transferring; however, checking transcript requests, we found that the number of these students even requesting a transcript be sent to another college was insignificant. We realize that a student who attended Mercy for one or two semesters and performed poorly might present himself to another college as a first time freshman; however, since every one of these students receives some form of federal assistance, applying for financial aid elsewhere would eventually reveal prior college experience and necessitate producing a transcript.

Briefly, then, those of us who had been teaching these students in Basic Skills courses assumed that, once identified deficiencies in academic content areas (Reading, Composition, Mathematics, and Chemistry) had been remediated, the students would progress well and normally toward graduation. In a sense, we were correct, i.e., the students were doing well enough academically, but they were still leaving us and higher education in droves. If we and the students were performing acceptably in things academic, then the causes for attrition must lie elsewhere.

At this time the College was putting together an AIDP proposal, as a part of which we included the formation of a Comprehensive Student Development Program to address attrition among the CAFT's. Subsequently funded, the Program set out to identify the causes of attrition, first by performing a needs assessment survey on all CAFT's enrolled at the time regardless of their class levels. Simultaneously, the same survey was completed by all faculty and staff; they responded in terms of the needs of these students as they perceived them. The survey was of the "card sort" variety so that needs were prioritized. Students at all levels consistently placed student-service-based needs at the top of their priority lists while faculty favored basic academic skills. That disparity was not as wide as it seems. Students will say that they are in college, for example, "to be a nurse" or "to get a good-paying job in computers." In other words, the student looks beyond the end of his college career even though he may be a first-semester freshman. Faculty, however, see these four years as an end in themselves; logically, those of us who have devoted our lives to higher education have a hard time

perceiving what we are doing as simply a means by which others reach an end. Part of our task, then, was to help these students see that, without success in the means (four years of college and a degree), there would be no desired end.

The group formed to take on the task of reducing CAFT attrition through meeting identified needs is known as the Key Personnel Group (KPG) and is made up of the President of the Faculty Senate, two student Peer Counselors, and the Directors of the following service offices: Academic Counseling Center, Admissions Office, Business Office, Campus Ministry, Career Planning and Placement, College Preparatory Program, Developmental Services Program, Financial Aid Office, Health Services, Learning Resource Center, Library, Personal Counseling, Residence Hall, and Student Activities. The heavy representation of student services was based on the students' having identified needs that could and should be addressed by those areas. The initial response of these Directors to the stated student needs was expected: they all claimed to be able and willing to meet the identified needs, but they never saw these students until crisis time--too late to be of any real assistance. Quite simply, students did not know where to go when to see whom about what, and service offices were low profile models of passivity. We had to find a way to show all the CAFT's early on what services were available, whom to see, when to do it, and we had to address the actual needs students had identified as barriers to their remaining here. Obviously, much of the problem centered around the dissemination of information such as would be available at new student orientation; however, reviewing attendance

records of such orientation, we saw that about 10% of any group of incoming CAFT's ever attended orientation. Besides, information at such orientations is usually presented so rapidly and at a time when students don't yet need it that it is quickly forgotten. Such information also appears in college catalogs, but few students read such publications carefully; in addition, the information is usually written by "insiders" for use by "insiders."

What the KPG hit upon to address the plethora of problems was the Orientation/Self-Management course which would be limited to and required of all CAFT's in their first semester as freshmen. The course would carry two hours of elective credit toward graduation and would be team taught by student service professionals. The philosophy on which the course is based is as follows:

I. The freshman student is recognized and supported for being an adult with the incumbent rights and responsibilities;

II. All aspects of the college experience and life involve a three-fold decision-making and goal-setting process. These three steps of research, choice, and action will be emphasized throughout the course;

III. The success of the orientation and retention of the college student is directly proportional to the quality and importance of the relationship between the student and the college. That relaship must include not only the attainment of skills

and knowledge, but also significant personal and group interaction among students, faculty, and administrators.

This philosophy was then translated into a three-part purpose statement for the course.

I. To study:

A. The student as an adult, vital, growing, developing, and independent person;

B. The college and its offerings, services, and policies; its place in the scheme of higher education, and its place in the community of Detroit;

C. The current and ongoing symbiotic relationship between the student and college including how the skills, learning processes, and knowledge gained while in college can be used thoughout life.

Translating this fine philosophy and these high-minded purposes into actual content which would address student needs in their terms and provide the exposure the service offices needed was the real chore. The course was designed to address in clusters the needs the students had identified; to orient the students to the service offices on campus and their personnel but to have the student service professionals teach a unit in their areas of expertise as a means of introducing themselves and their office capabilities to the students. Before launching into the detailed description of the course, I might note

that these administrators designed such a thoroughly professional offering and so cogently presented it to the faculty Curriculum Committee as to have it approved immediately.

The course begins with a cluster of units fitted under the heading of "Goals: Yours and the College's." The President of Mercy College and the Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs team teach an initial unit on the mission and goals of the College as they apply to these students, and they discuss with the students the disparity that often exists between what a college sees as its goal and what society sees as the proper role of higher education. The presence of the top two administrators in the classroom works two ways: it impresses the students with the value the College places on this course and these students; just as important, this is the only chance these two individuals have during a year to teach a class. Next, the Director of Personal Counseling teaches units on goal setting as applicable to the students' personal goals. As noted earlier, these students often indicate that their goal in coming to college is to get a good job, thus defining two problems to be addressed--confusion of personal and academic goals as well as inability to see anything other than a long-term goal. Students receive intensive instruction in stating personal goals that are short-, intermediate-, and long-term. Each of these is to be accomplished during the semester and is reported on by the students at the projected completion date. Then, the Director of Academic Counseling teaches very similar units, but these deal strictly with academic goals.

It should be noted at this point that, although much of the

instruction occurs via lecture in the classroom, the students do have a text for collateral reading--Career Planning. 2nd ed. by Bruce Shertzer. In addition to reading this text as assigned, students submit a total of 28 assignments during a semester which are corrected and graded. Each assignment, including a midterm and a final examination, is equally weighted so that students can keep their own grade average easily. The syllabus makes it clear that late assignments are less than desirable. Any assignment may be submitted up to one week after the due date, but the grade will be no higher than a "C." Any assignment not submitted within that week's grace period will earn a failing grade.

The next major cluster in the course, following on the heels of goal-setting, is "Reaching Your Academic Goals." Time and again, faculty indicate that these students have the ability to succeed but not the knowledge of how to succeed, i.e., they are ignorant of the difference between a college attender and a college student. The first units, taught by the Director of the Developmental Services Center, focus on the psychological factors influencing learning. Here, the students' study habits, behaviors, and skills are reviewed and assessed while instruction regarding motivation, discipline, concentration, and methods is given. Following this, the staff of the Learning Resource Center present units on approaches to textbooks and college-level reading assignments. Here, students are exposed to various methods, e.g., SQ3R, of approaching textbooks and notetaking from reading assignments. Having completed those units, the LRC staff move into notetaking from lecture--a skill few of these students have. Most of these students have an "all-and then-none" approach to taking notes

from lectures, i.e., they begin by trying to take down every word a lecturer utters, but, when they realize that method is futile, they stop taking notes altogether. In these units students learn selective listening, key words instructors use, outline methods, recopying of notes into studyable fashion, etc. As a final portion of their presentations, the LRC staff deals with managing study behavior including the establishing of a weekly specific study schedule, group study methods, etc.

The final portions of this cluster are taught by the Faculty Senate President, who addresses the organizing of writing assignments and the art of test taking. Although all of the students are in some level of English Composition, they often have lengthy writing assignments in other courses before the organization of such assignments will be covered in the Composition classes. Thus, they are given some exposure here to a method of pre-writing which would help them organize their thoughts regardless of the content area. Then, too, we realize that there are some tricks of the trade in college-level test taking; thus, we try to expose the students to these tricks. Students are shown ways of addressing the various types of objective tests they will encounter in college. More important is the instruction they receive on essay-question examinations. Usually, when these students are faced with an essay esamination, they write in spite of the question as posed rather than because of it, i.e., they simply write, in no particular order, everything they know about the general subject area; what they need is an understanding of the direction words in the question, e.g., "critique," "discuss," "compare," "summarize," etc.

To complete this cluster, the Librarian and his staff offer units first on library orientation and use and then on basic research methodology. Again, students may be in courses already that require a research paper, but they would not receive any formal instruction in research methodology until the second semester Composition course. Here, students learn a basic but effective research methodology including the library's tools for research, notetaking from sources, bibliography construction, and footnoting.

Recognizing from our attrition study and student responses on the needs assessment survey that a student can be performing well enough academically but still be headed out of higher education, we called the next cluster "Roadblocks to Reaching Academic Goals." The cluster begins with units on stress--how to recognize, use, and defuse academically related stress. This material is team taught by the Directors of Student Health Services and Personal Counseling. These units are followed by Director of Student Health Services' presentation on nutrition, preventive health care, and wellness. It has been reported by the personal counselors that at least half of their student-clients who come in with a certain problem are simultaneously suffering from a form of malnutrition, i.e., the effects of a poor, unbalanced diet. Through surveys in class and discussion regarding this matter, students are surprised to learn that their sluggishness, daydreaming, or nervousness may be related to their diets. As important as these units may be to helping students obviate roadblocks to their academic success, the next units may be of even greater significance.

Still under the same cluster come the units on financial resources

Each of these students is receiving some form of financial assistance, usually the maximum allowable. At the same time, they have historically been the worst group on campus at getting their necessary forms completed accurately and on time. Consequently, their approvals and payments are often late causing the College to dun students for payment against the arrival of federal aid and students to get angry and leave school. Given the bleak economic outlook in the metro Detroit area, information on finances is paramount for these students. The units are taught by the team of the Financial Aid Officer and the College Comptroller. Students are presented with the history and purpose of financial aid to college as well as the various sources of assistance available to them. The FAO takes the students through an application/approval/payment process and details clearly the dates and data which are essential for the students who are applying for assistance. As important as this information is, that which the Comptroller offers is just as essential. Since most of the college's students are commuters and hold full-or part-time jobs, they have personal budgeting problems to an extent which residential students would not. The Comptroller teaches various methods of personal/domestic budget management, attaining credit and using it wisely. This exposure from the top business officer on campus is key in that most students usually never see him until a crisis arises, thus leading students to perceive his office as the institutionalization of Simon Legree. These presentations on finances conclude this cluster.

The next major segment, "Knowing and Knowing How to Communicate," has a dual purpose: first, the students need to understand very clearly

the rules and regulations of the College as they apply to students; second, they need to understand something of faculty and administrator expectations of students so that they can communicate effectively with those groups. The first units of this segment are taught by the Registrar and the Dean of Students. The Registrar, using the College catalog, insures that students understand such matters as grade point average computation, withdrawal procedures, declaration of major guidelines, academic functions, academic good standing, pre-registration processes, etc. The Dean of Students speaks to student grievance procedures, Residence Hall regulations, social probation, student conduct code, etc. Admittedly, the College provides this information in official publications, but few students ever spend much time reading such material carefully. Being asked at crisis point, "Didn't you read the Catalog"?, is not exactly what a perturbed student needs to hear. Quite simply, the students here learn the system and how to use it.

Wrapping up this cluster are units taught by the President of the Faculty Senate and two Peer Counselors on effective communication between students and faculty/administrators. Students are familiarized in quite realistic fashion with certain faculty assumptions and expectations which control behavior. Through simulations and role playing these expectations are brought to life for the students. For example, a student misses two classes in a row, returns to class, and asks the instructor, "Did I miss anything?" When the instructor hits the roof, the student is taken aback. Or, the same student, when called upon his first class back after an absence, responds, "I wasn't here the last time," as if that exonerated the student from all responsibility. In

most cases, the students believe they are not behaving in any untoward fashion; what they need is the information presented here with respect to faculty/staff expectation and assumptions.

The final cluster in the course is headed "Exploring Occupations--The World of Work." In the needs assessment survey the students regularly identified career-related needs at the top of their list, and this held true for freshmen as well as seniors. Again, students see college in terms of a job or position they expect after graduation. Yet, not only has attrition been so high that few of these students ever make it to graduation, but also they rarely make use of the Career Planning Center or do so only as second-semester seniors. The team that handles this cluster includes the Director of Career Planning and Placement, Director of Academic Counseling, Director of Student Activities, and the Director of Personnel for the College.

Each student completes interest, personality, and ability inventories, the results of which are returned to them during this segment of the course. Few of these students have much experience with any sort of reality counseling in academics and thus arrive in college with career goals that all but doom them to disappointment. The Directors of Academic Counseling and Career Planning work together with the students to interconnect their abilities with academic and career plans. Students are further encouraged to "live" a resumé while in college from first semester on rather than waiting until the end of their college career to construct that document. Here, the Director of Student Activities shows the students the connection between the extra-curricular/co-curricular activities available and the students'

career goals. The Director of Personnel works with the students on interviewing techniques and takes them through mock job interviews. All of this is done to connect for the students what they do in college with what they claim they want to do after they are degreed. After these sessions only the final examination and course evaluation remain.

The reactions to this course and the impact of it on the students and the entire campus community have been positive and gratifying. Student evaluations have consistently been supportive of this effort; perhaps, the most often heard student reaction is "Why wasn't I taught all of this in high school? What a difference it would have made to me then!" Some faculty feared that this course with its heavy and demanding workload would result in the students' receiving low grades, but no more than six out of each class of 100 students have ever failed the course. We believe that, because the assignments are so clearly related to the classroom instruction/readings, because our expectations of the students are clearly stated, and because the graded feedback is immediate, students now view assignments as a chance to earn a decent grade rather than one more opportunity to fail. Indeed, it is the inculcation of such attitudes and behaviors that this course is all about--quite simply, it is the teaching of form rather than content.

The faculty and staff reactions to this course have been equally pleasing. Faculty advisors report that their students are eminently better prepared to take an active role in designing their individual academic programs and are "demanding" better and more informed academic advising from the faculty. Student service office use has jumped markedly since the inception of this course. Student service pro-

fessionals are thoroughly enjoying their new role as "faculty" in the course and are getting exposure for themselves and their areas which was heretofore impossible to gain. This exposure also gives them some understanding of and sympathy for the faculty whose quirky behavior results in part from having to deal with these students almost daily in the classroom. Also, many faculty have been lobbying us to open this course to all freshmen since they see that even the clearly admitted, supposedly brighter students need what we are teaching in this course. Just this past year, the College has established a Standing Committee on retention, but, unlike any other standing faculty committee, this one is made up of half faculty and half student service professionals. The first recommendation out of this committee has been that an Orientation/Self-Management course be designed for all our various student populations.

As uplifting to us as these impressionistic data are, the hard facts on retention are even more important in that the offering of such a course grew from our attempt to stem attrition among the CAFT's. This course is just one portion of the larger Comprehensive Student Development Program aimed at attrition problems, but it is the most significant aspect of the Program. After the offering of this course, the attrition rate of CAFT's has dropped by 50% in contrast to the rate for CAFT's at Mercy College prior to the Orientation/Self-Management course. The "before" and "after" groups came with the same GPA's and ACT's and had the same Basic Skills Courses avilable; the only difference is the availability of this course. The highest period of attrition for CAFT's historically had been during the summer between the freshman and sophomore

years; approximately 46% of a class of CAFT's would not return for a second Fall term. Since we began this course, that rate has been holding at no more than 15%. Therefore, even though we are a four-year college, such a course would be applicable to a two-year institution if its attrition rate follows this same pattern of heavy drop out between years one and two. We now have every reason to believe that we will begin to graduate something well above the 5% of CAFT's who were completing degrees prior to our Program. The positive impact this will have on our recruiting and public image is invaluable. Not only has the design and offering of this course made a difference at Mercy College, but also it has had a widespread influence. I have assisted any number of colleges, two-year and four-year, in establishing similar offerings at their institutions.

It should be obvious that such a course is readily and easily adaptable to almost any institution of higher education. The approval and support of such a course was quickly garnered at Mercy College but not because our faculty and administration are pushovers! Attrition figures, translated into dollars, are impressive enough to administrators and can be just as motivational to faculty whose class sizes may be dangerously low. In addition, any college that can be guaranteed an enrollment of 100 students in a two-hour course for which no faculty salary is paid tends to look favorably on such an experiment. Thus, there are both short term and long term practical values to such a course.

Finally, such a course aids our College in moving toward one of its goals of providing educational opportunity to a diverse urban population and assisting that population in reaching desired educational

goals. Providing that assistance is our true goal; improved retention is the spin-off benefit.

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